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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000239

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/15/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: KOMSOMOLSKAYA PRAVDA'S NEW CHIEF EDITOR SEEMS  
COMMITTED TO OBJECTIVE REPORTING

REF: MINSK 219

Classified By: CDA Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

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11. (C) Yelena Mironova, the new Editor-in-Chief of Komsomolskaya Pravda, Belarus' largest independent newspaper, admitted to Pol/Econ Chief that upon accepting the position she signed an agreement acknowledging that she would accept "certain editorial guidelines." However, Mironova convincingly argued that her supervisors in Moscow made it clear that no topics were taboo. Mironova views KP as a truly independent newspaper, with no spin towards the GOB or the opposition. End summary.

Why the Old Editor was Replaced; Job Expectations  
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12. (C) During a March 15 interview with Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff, Yelena Mironova explained her unexpected promotion to Editor-in-Chief of Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP), Belarus' largest independent newspaper, with a circulation for its daily and weekly editions of 50,000 and 322,000 copies, respectively. Mironova began her career as a journalist at KP, then became an editor at the advertising newspaper "V Bank" and, until four months ago, worked as editor of the advertisement section of KP. The new KP Editor-in-Chief indicated that her predecessor, Yuliya Slutskaya, left because of internal political issues revolving around how she executed her job as editor, and not solely because of GOB pressure to replace her. The owners of the newspaper expect their editors to keep the paper neutral; it should report on the news, not get involved in it or slant it.

13. (C) Mironova openly stated that when she accepted her new position she signed a statement agreeing to work within the framework of "certain editorial guidelines." However, she was told that she could write on any topic: i.e., there were no taboo subjects. The only stipulations were that she report varying points of view, and truly present a well balanced picture of each issue. Mironova added that the tone of any article that criticized GOB behavior or activity must not be too sharp if her newspaper is to stay alive in Belarus.

KP Is Not Like Other Independent Newspapers  
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14. (C) Mironova noted that KP and BelGazeta are the only two remaining independent newspapers founded before the fall of the Soviet Union. In part this explains the paper's high circulation. Mironova stressed that for a number of

Belarusians, KP long ago became a newspaper "they could not only believe, but believe in." Mironova also thinks KP attracts such a wide audience because it treats its readership and its advertisers as a business should--delivering what they want in a timely, professional, and interesting manner.

15. (C) Mironova sees a clear difference between truly independent newspapers and opposition newspapers. She commented that self acclaimed opposition newspapers, or ones whose content clearly places them in the opposition camp, are simply asking for trouble with the GOB. As a "people's" newspaper, KP must cover political, economic, and "everyday life" issues. However, Mironova underscored that KP endeavors to put forth several points of view and impartially cover all newsworthy events.

16. (C) While Mironova acknowledged that she believes her newspaper to "be in the same boat" as other, smaller, independent newspapers, she believes KP has avoided the level of harassment the others have experienced because of its "true popularity." She cited KP's coverage of the recent oil and gas conflict with Russia as an example of both the paper's ability to feely cover any topic and its objectivity. She related that while in Moscow three week ago, colleagues there commented that they could not tell from KP's articles which way the newspaper leaned on that issue. Furthermore, unlike many other independent newspapers, KP has access to the GOB monopolies on printing and vending services (Belsayuzdruk), and on mail distribution (Belpochta). Mironova believes that the GOB likely continues to allow KP to use these services because the GOB makes a profit on it. She explained that in contrast to many state subsidized newspapers, KP sells all the papers it publishes, so the

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government receives payment for every paper printed.

But KP Is Not Immune From Pressure

17. (C) Mironova noted that for the past several years the GOB has put indirect pressure on her newspaper by failing to invite KP journalists to GOB-organized press conferences and events. Furthermore, when KP journalists request interviews with senior GOB officials, instead of granting an interview, the GOB provides them a prepared statement. Therefore, as reported by other independent newspapers (ref B), KP journalists must also rely solely on working-level personal contacts in the regime for official GOB news. Mironova also told Pol/Econ Chief that KP cannot afford to pay its journalists the high wages that she knows journalists employed by state media receive. However, she admitted that the average wage at KP remains far higher than the average wages in other independent newspapers.

What Interests KP's Readership?

18. (C) KP has an online version of its newspaper and tracks both the number of hits the site as a whole receives, as well as each article. Mironova said that KP's readership remains interested in political and economic issues, such as developments within the domestic opposition, the rising cost of housing, and the "positive and negative" actions of the GOB. Mironova added that the internet version, which continues to grow in popularity, has a significantly different readership than the print version. In her opinion this is likely due to the difficulty of getting access to the internet.

Comment

19. (C) Although it maintains a tabloid format largely devoid

of policy substance, KP occupies a unique position in Belarus. It is the only independent newspaper with a readership in excess of 25,000. Furthermore, it is one of only two independent papers that do not receive support from Western sources. Mironova is likely correct that the paper's continued success is due in part to being well established before Lukashenko came to power, and to KP's commitment to reporting objectively on popular issues (and not focusing exclusively on the weaknesses in the regime). It probably does not hurt that the newspaper's owners have strong ties to Russia. Since Slutskaya's departure we have not noticed any decline in accuracy or content. In fact, KP may have become more credible by covering more "sharp" stories. Mironova does not have the same reputation with the GOB for favoring the opposition that Slutskaya did and may not fear GOB retaliation to the same extent. Given these factors, it seems likely that KP will  
1 remain an independent media outlet.  
Stewart